



Alaska Sea Otters

The Southwest decline continues

The Sea Otter Decline

In the mid-1980s, biologists believed that the majority of the world's sea otters lived in the nearshore waters of southwest Alaska. Once protected from commercial fur hunters, sea otters in this remote corner of the globe quickly recovered and began to occupy much of their former range.

The first indications that all was not well with the southwest Alaska sea otter population came in 1992, when the FWS conducted the first comprehensive aerial survey of sea otters in the Aleutian islands in 27 years. While this survey demonstrated that otters had returned to all six major island groups in the Aleutians, they had inexplicably declined in the Rat, Delarof, and Andreanof island groups. Skiff surveys by the USGS revealed sea otter declines at several islands during the 1990s. In 2000, the FWS repeated the comprehensive aerial survey, which revealed an overall 70% population decline in just eight years. Additional aerial surveys along the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak archipelago showed that the sea otter population decline was not limited to the Aleutian islands alone. As of 2001, sea otters throughout southwest Alaska had decline by an estimated 56-68%.

Recent Surveys

In 2003, the FWS and USGS conducted skiff surveys in the western and central Aleutian islands (Table 1). Sea otter counts at six of these islands have declined by a further 63% in the past three years. Preliminary results of other surveys conducted along the Alaska Peninsula indicate that the population continues to decline in that area as well.



Conservation Measures

Sea otters in southwest Alaska are a Candidate Species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and are currently under consideration for addition to the Endangered Species List. ESA protection will lead to additional research on the cause of the decline,

which remains unknown. Recovery planning will also consider other possible threats, and the FWS will work with other Federal Agencies to insure that future activities do not jeopardize the southwest Alaska sea otter population.

Table 1. Recent sea otter counts in the Aleutian Islands.

Location	2000 Count	2003 Count	Decline
Adak	861	392	-54.5%
Kagalaska	54	15	-72.2%
Little Tanaga	56	19	-66.1%
Attu	606	132	-78.8%
Semichi Islands	76	24	-68.8%
Amchitka*	157	93	-40.8%
Total	1,810	675	-62.7%

* Only transects AMC001-005 and AMC032 surveyed in 2000 and 2003.

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